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QUESTION OF THE REALIZATION OF THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT

Written statement submitted by the International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1295 (XLIV).

[27 December 1996]

GE.97-10268 (E)

1. At the opening of the fifty-second session, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mr. José Ayala Lasso, said that it was the responsibility of the Commission on Human Rights to "pave the way for a future of peace, democracy and development" and that its primary objective should be "to make the enjoyment of human rights a reality for all people" (E/CN.4/1996/103).

2. The International Federation of Rural Adult Catholic Movements (FIMARC), within which 61 rural people's movements and organizations operate in four continents, fully shares this outlook. As a non-governmental organization with the honour to have consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, the Federation wishes to contribute to the Council's work by presenting the viewpoint of rural people.

3. Faced with an increasingly globalized economy that is generally represented to them as an inescapable phenomenon to which there is no possible alternative, the rural movements are experiencing the grim reality of this type of economy, with all its adverse repercussions in their daily life. At the same time the communal projects of the rural movements, forerunners of a form of development that would restore man to his place at the centre of the economy, are seriously jeopardized. The initiatives they have taken to meet the urgent needs of the populations are labouring under enormous difficulties.

4. To understand and analyse the mechanisms of this economic system which is grinding them down, the delegates of the coordinating bodies of the rural movements of four continents recently devoted a fortnight-long seminar to the study of this question.

5. Pointing out the realities of life as lived in their respective countries by the rural populations, they stressed the ever widening and deepening gulf between rich and poor, whether in the countries of the North or in those of the South.

6. Their observation is confirmed by the Human Development Report 1996, which shows that the 358 largest fortunes on the planet are equal to the income of the poorest 45 per cent of the human race, numbering 2.3 billion persons, and that the richest 20 per cent of the world's people share 82.7 per cent of its overall income, while the poorest 20 per cent receive only 1.4 per cent. Even in the countries of the European Union, four of which are among the world's seven richest countries, over 30 per cent of the active population live in straightened circumstances. The poorest rural populations, and more particularly their women and children, are among the countless victims of this inequitable and unjust economic system which is producing more and more poor people.

7. Meanwhile, the multinational companies and transnational trading enterprises are inventing ways of making money still more easily, creating a bonanza for the financial markets which have the political authorities at their mercy and engineer destabilization of local economies. Thus every day billions of dollars circulate at the whim of exchange rate fluctuations, for purposes of speculation, and are therefore not invested in productive activities, the primary objective of this economic model being to make profits, not jobs.

8. The paradox of the globalized system lies in the fact that the wealth exists and the poor are ever more numerous. And yet the United Nations Development Programme acknowledges that the essential needs of the poorest countries could be met on the basis of an annual expenditure of 30 to 40 billion dollars over 10 years. The root of this paradox is to be found in the neoliberal economic policy that practically all States are pursuing, constrained as they are by the imperatives of the financial markets.

9. This neoliberal policy is destroying the fragile economic system of the rural world. The orientation of agricultural activities mainly towards the market has resulted in serious imbalances. A great many farming plots, all over the world, have been turned over to industrial monoculture for export, demolishing the self-sufficiency in food of many rural areas. Thus Brazil, the leading producer of coffee and raw sugar, cannot feed all its inhabitants and one out of five of them suffers from hunger. Food security is therefore more a problem of economic policy than a technical problem of production. In many countries transnational concerns have taken over a major part of the farmlands with a view to industrial food production, resulting in migration of peasants to the towns. This draining of the countryside aggravates the difficulties of the urban areas while destroying the traditional values and cultural heritage of the rural populations.

10. The ever-increasing indebtedness of the peasantry is directly linked to the debt crisis of the poor countries. A large part of those countries' income is used for debt servicing, proportionately reducing public assistance, social welfare and the infrastructural investments essential for their development.

11. Structural adjustments are imposed on the poor countries by international monetary agencies such as the IMF or the World Bank. Thus, with the policy of "one dollar = one vote" seven industrialized countries in the world command over 45 per cent of the votes in the international control bodies while the 45 countries of Africa have only 4 per cent of the votes between them.

12. The autonomy of rural people in determining their own development no longer exists when the basic right of peasants to form organizations is denied, restricted or controlled. In the rural areas this is causing tension. The leaders of peoples' organizations are kept watch on, threatened, subjected to repression and even killed, as current events in Brazil again reminded us a few weeks ago.

13. This neoliberal economy is dictating, in fact, the destiny of human-kind and restricting the possibilities of intervening to reverse its course. The political power of nations is sapped and the United Nations authorities crippled. The declarations of various United Nations bodies calling for protection of nature and guarantees for basic democratic rights remain a dead letter, impotent to take concrete form.

14. The dehumanizing situation imposed on rural people actuates the FIMARC movements to reaffirm their convictions and express their determination to:

Combat the neoliberal economic policies that reduce human beings to nothing but their market value;

Attain their goal of cancellation of the debt, subject to the condition that Governments commit themselves to changing their policies and above all giving priority to meeting their peoples' basic food, health and education needs;

Promote a social economy that will ensure sustainable and mutually beneficial development;

Affirm the inalienable right of rural people to protect their lands, their know-how, their traditional seeds and their medical knowledge, and above all to safeguard their cultural heritages and their value systems;

Be the agents of their own development, with the will to eliminate poverty, most scandalous of absurdities in the midst of plenty and of wealth;

Support the struggle of the indigenous peoples who, all over the world, are striving to defend their livelihood, their lands and their cultures.

15. The rural movements affiliated to the FIMARC are taking steps, all together and in each continent, for the effective realization of their rights. In the areas where action is urgently needed, education stands in the forefront and is of crucial importance, for it is the precondition for any awakening of consciousness and a sine qua non for the assumption of responsibility. In concrete terms, rural peoples with their movements are intensifying the process of consciousness-raising and promoting the participation of women so that all in unison, men and women alike, can more effectively analyse the adverse effects on their individual and communal lives of neoliberal policies and the dangers inherent in globalization of the economy. They are organizing immersion programmes in order to compare the development experience of other movements with their own and to develop a form of national and international solidarity that takes account of cultural diversity and differing value systems. They are intensifying their programmes of alternative development, in particular:

By developing the alternative marketing system at national and international levels;

By adopting an environment-friendly model of agricultural production;

By stepping up cooperation in the areas of production, processing and distribution;

By developing alternative credit facilities for peasants.

16. To increase their political power and hence their ability to combat the dominant system, they are continuing to form alliances and networks with other groups that share the same viewpoint, with other non-governmental organizations, other forces in society such as organizations of indigenous people, fishermen, or traditional craft workers, organizations for the defence of human rights and the environment, consumers' associations, etc. They are continuing their struggle for land rights and for the right to a decent livelihood from the land. They are seeking, by specific actions, and particularly within the Commission on Human Rights at Geneva, to draw attention to the fundamental right of peasants and of all rural people to form organizations, without being subjected to repression.

17. They are pursuing their efforts aimed at enabling women to take their place, in greater numbers, in civil institutions or political organizations, and to enjoy equitable treatment, more particularly in the remuneration system; the Beijing Conference emphasized the urgent need to continue these efforts. They are associating themselves, locally and at the national level in their own countries, with activicies to combat the exploitation of women and every form of violence manifested in the tourist industry or at the marital abode, as well as through discrimination against girls in education.

18. On the occasion of the World Summit for Social Development at Copenhagen, the non-governmental organizations' Forum affirmed in its final declaration that the dominant neoliberal system had failed as a model for universal development and that, all over the world, it was mainly the rural populations which suffered its adverse effects. The rural populations can only subscribe to the Declaration of the Summit itself, which in its programme of action affirms the need to "place people at the centre of development and direct our economies to meet human needs more effectively". The rural movements have chosen that path and await the support of all international authorities that truly wish to promote the realization of the right to development.